DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 807 CS 507 036

AUTHOR Mackin, Jim
TITLE Beyond Cultural Relativism: An Ecological Model for Rhetorical Ethics.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Cultural Context; Ecology; *Ethics; *Models; Moral Values; Research Needs; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS Aristotle; Communication Theory; *Cultural Relativism

ABSTRACT

A model intended to overcome the cultural relativism of determining what is an ethical act draws an analogy to environmental studies. Beginning with the concepts of "telos" (final purpose) and "archai" (priority), the notion of an ecosystem of ethics avoids limitation to a particular historical definition of good. Since the telos of human life is the quest for the good, a communicative ecosystem's virtues are those which enable its members to seek the good. An ideal communicative system supports all parts equally, and the parts in turn support the system. The telos of the individual and of the system are interrelated; both must be taken into account in making ethical decisions. The practice of living ethically will include system building and transforming. How to help the present system become more like the ideal without making the system less viable is the central question. Combining the notions of public and private into a systems relationship should increase understanding of the problem of morality, but also will raise new inquiries. (Twenty-five notes are included.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED314807

BEYOND CULTURAL RELATIVISM
AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR RHETORICAL ETHICS

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jim Mackin
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by Jim Mackin
Dept. of Communication
Tulane University
New Orleans, LA 70118
BITNET: CO01AKF@TCSVM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS507036

Anyone who has taught communication ethics is aware of the difficulty in achieving a consensus on how to evaluate any given action. Surveys of the field of communication ethics would generally lead us to conclude that it is impossible to find even a common ground for argument among most of the competing theories.[1] We usually offer a smorgasbord of competing theories and hope that our students make a good choice. The problem is not just that we cannot come to agreement on what would be an ethical act of communication in a particular situation but that we cannot even agree on what would constitute an ethical act of communication in general.

The smorgasbord we offer varies, but it usually includes at least three varieties of ethical fare. For those who follow the contemporary version of the Humean argument that facts and values are separated by an uncrossable gap, ethical argument is emotive argument and so reducible to individual sentiments or tastes. Argument over subjective taste is a waste of time; de gustibus non est disputandum. On the other hand, those who have sought to avoid the Humean problem by basing ethics in a given society's claims upon the individual seem to be subject to the charge of cultural relativism. The rhetoric of Hitler and Goebbels may not live up to our cultural standards; we can give "good reasons" not to accept their model of rhetoric in our society. But a neo-Nazi might reply that our cultural standards do not comprehend Nazi rhetoric and so simply do not apply. To escape cultural relativism, the dogmatists of different persuasions offer transcendent definitions of the good from which specific rules for action are derived as in the Scholastic model. With an a priori definition of good, the dogmatists foreclose argument at any level beyond casuistry. Casuistic argument can only be conducted within the given tradition that accepts the dogmatic definition of the good. Given the current alternatives, the question for communication ethics is, Is it possible to avoid subjectivism or relativism on one hand and dogmatism on the other? Celeste Condit has proposed that we can escape this dilemma by accepting a view of public morality as rhetorically constructed and affected by objective as well as subjective factors.[2]

I agree with Condit's overall project, but I am not sure that she has solved the problem. When she tries to show us how rhetoric can actually improve public morality, she offers us no means of determining what is to count as improvement. Of course, most of us agree that the inclusion of Blacks into our code of justice was a public moral advance; but the fact of our agreement does not provide a standard by which we can know that we have improved. The problem seems to be that Condit, in correcting the errors of the "privatizers," has not offered us a means of evaluating the actual state of our public morality. Movement toward universality is taken to be moral growth, but why that should be is not explained. While her approach offers some valuable insights into the problem, I don't believe she has escaped the charge of cultural relativism.

In my own study of the problem, I have found that a synthesis of Condit's concern with the public and Alasdair MacIntyre's focus on the individual offers a possible escape from cultural relativism.[3] What I would like to do in this paper is provide a model that balances private and public interests and that can be used to evaluate our own cultural ethical standards. Borrowing from environmental studies, I propose an ecological model that relates the telos of any communicative or social system to the telos of the individual. A communicative system is an ecosystem when it nurtures the individuals within it in their quest for the good. Admittedly, there are many different ways an ecosystem could develop and still nurture its individual members; no given system can serve as a transcendental model for communicative ecosystems. But the formal concept that a functioning ecosystem supports its constituent members and that its functioning members fill a niche in the ecosystem provides the basic principle that transcends cultures while avoiding a dogmatic definition of what should constitute the good for the individual or for the culture in any given case. The formal principle of the ecological ethic serves only to provide a teleological ground for public moral argument about what constitutes the good in a given case of communication. In this sense, what I am offering is a metaethical ground for rhetorical ethics--a means of evaluating how well we are crafting our public morality.

I will begin by examining some basic principles, or archai, of an ethic based on the ecological model. The term archai in Greek suggests priority in time as well as priority in authority; thus the English language has derived both archeology and hierarchy from the term. The Greek term is appropriate because, in fact, the theory I propose here is heavily indebted to the functional approach to morals contained in Aristotelian ethics, especially as further developed by MacIntyre. So in one sense the proposed theory returns to a more archaic concept of ethics. However, the principles proposed here seek to transcend the cultural relativism inherent in both Aristotle's and MacIntyre's systems by anchoring the principles in the formal properites of the communicative ecosystem rather than in a particular cultural tradition. Just as we must live in a biological ecosystem, we must necessarily communicate in a communicative ecosystem. However symbolism and communication may have arisen, they must have arisen out of a relationship between people. As communication developed, the nature of that relationship was altered forever; but the fact that communication must

take place within a system of relationships has not changed. Each of us learned to communicate within a system of relationships, most often, a family. As in the biological ecosystem, the particular form or culture of the communicative ecosystem is contingent upon historical circumstances. The Aristotelian version of ethics is based in a particular subculture of Athenian aristocrats. As a result, while suggesting a profitable approach to ethics, Aristotle's ethics lack the authority of true archai in a multicultural society. Nevertheless, Aristotle's concepts represent the reflections of a keen mind observing a particular historical ecosystem and so can help inform an ecological model.

The archai of an ecological ethic consist of a reinterpretation of key concepts in ethical theory--virtue (arete), the telos of an individual life, practice (praxis), and the mean (meson vs. homoiorhesis)--in light of the formal properties of communicative ecosystems. From these formal properties I will derive a foundation for rhetorical ethics based in a dialectical balance between the telos of the individual and the telos of the system. Like Condit's approach, the theory of ecological ethics is concerned with public ethics rather than solely private ethics in that the individual is considered as a part affecting the whole not as an entity unto itself. Yet in another sense, the public-private distinction is subsumed within the formal relationships of an ecosystem.

Because my theory is an evolutionary development upon Greek thought and upon MacIntyre's attempt to reclaim Greek thought for contemporary ethics, this paper will begin with a dialectical development of Aristotle's and MacIntyre's foundational concepts reconsidered in light of the ecological model. The earlier concepts resolve the problems of the Enlightenment separation of fact and value but they do not solve the problem of cultural relativism. The formal principles of the ecosystem are the means I propose for transcending a given culture. Because of the time and space limits of this forum, by the end of this paper I can only hope to have presented the general outline of a metaethical theory based in an ecological model.

Because I must reclaim the original functional sense of the ethical terms used in order to avoid the Humean dichotomy of fact and value, I will begin by examining Aristotle and MacIntyre's contributions to our understanding of these terms before developing them further in light of the ecological model. Aristotle's theory of ethics is based in arete, often translated as virtue. However, many translators prefer to render the term as excellence because in Greek usage arete was a functional concept. Virtue in this sense is excellence in carrying out a purpose or role. We use the word virtue in the Greek sense of arete when we say, "This computer has the virtue of compatibility with the most popular software programs." Virtue is not a chance excellence in functioning but a disposition to function well over time. In humans, virtue is a habit of regularly functioning well in a particular role, that role being determined by the needs of the community--the polis. The highest value for the individual human being is happiness, which Aristotle defines as an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue throughout a complete life.[4] So for Aristotle, the happiness of the individual is ultimately determined by that individual's functioning within the community. Note that this functional interpretation of value, virtue, and the good avoids Hume's problem of fact and value. Value is a factual claim about a given person's functioning within a community. To say that a person ought to perform a given duty is comparable to saying that a computer ought to run the necessary software programs. Only when the individual element is removed from its functional relationships does an is-ought dilemma arise.

MacIntyre's major contribution to the Aristotelian ethic is anchoring the telos of the individual in that person's own narrative of his or her life. Much of modern thought is incapable of visualizing the human life as a unity. In Sartre's existentialism, the individual is separated from the roles that person plays; in Goffman's sociology, life is a series of unconnected episodes. But in MacIntyre's concept of selfhood, the unity of the self "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end."[5] According to MacIntyre, human actions in general are "enacted narratives."[6] What MacIntyre has added to Aristotle's ethical theory is a dramatistic view of human action, similar to Kenneth Burke's (which, in turn, relies heavily on implications in Aristotle's metaphysics). MacIntyre is often specifically dramatistic, and his dramatism contains an awareness of systemic constraints:

> Now I must emphasize that what the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. . . . We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. . . . Each of our dramas exerts constraints on each other's, making the whole different from the parts, but still dramatic.[7]

The telos, or final purpose, of the narrative is the quest for good. "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest" for the good.[8] Virtues are those dispositions or habits that

> not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good. We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those

> which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.[9]

If happiness is the summum bonum, then happiness consists in the life spent on the quest for the good.

Another key element in MacIntyre's ethics is the concept of a "practice" because practice is a source of goods. By "practice" MacIntyre means

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[10]

MacIntyre is here extending and developing Aristotle's notion of praxis as the actualizing (energeia) of a potential (dunamis) purely for the sake of actualizing rather than for the sake of achieving a productive result (ergon) from that actualizing.[11] Notice that the achievement of internal goods requires a "socially established" and "cooperative" activity. In other words, practice can only take place within a communicative system.

A good example of the distinction between practice and production was observable in the most recent winter Olympics. Athletic artistry performed for its own sake is a practice, or praxis, in MacIntyre's and Aristotle's sense. So, for example, a U.S. skier was proud of her sixth-place finish because she had achieved a higher level of artistry in the actual performance of the event. The ranking simply acknowledged what she had already achieved. The medal counters, however, who were comparing the total medals achieved by the United States, the Soviet Union, East Germany, and the other major powers were measuring success by a productive result. In the reasoning of the medal counters, the ergon of Olympic athletics is to gain a gold medal; they are not concerned with the practice for its own sake. The medal counters are interpreting Olympic athletics as poiesis, a productive art resulting in the achievement of goods extrinsic to the performance itself. In both MacIntyre's and Aristotle's theories, however, practices are concerned only with intrinsic goods not extrinsic goods.

In reality, of course, practices are not that easily distinguished from productive activities. A person engaged in any given activity may aim for goods that are both intrinsic and extrinsic. For example, one may take up skiing purely for its own sake or to gain business contacts or for a mixture of the two reasons. Regularly repeated activities are most likely to be hybrid practices, offering both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. This mixing of practice and production makes the distinction between the two a case of more or less. That is why MacIntyre takes portrait painting to be a practice, whereas Aristotle considered it not a praxis but a poiesis, a productive art. MacIntyre departs from Aristotle in considering the product as part of the practice. The excellence of the finished painting is a result of the excellence of the practice of painting. Actually, whether portrait painting is praxis or poiesis depends on the purpose of the painter. If the painter saw the purpose of painting as the making of a product to sell, then the act of painting was poiesis. If the painter created the painting as a byproduct of the act of painting with the purpose of painting as well as possible, then the act was clearly praxis. Most likely it was a mixture of the two.

As MacIntyre points out, "in the ancient and medieval worlds the creation and sustaining of human communities--of households, cities, nations--is generally taken to be a practice."[12] Since I intend to show that the act of creating and sustaining community is a communicative act, I would adapt MacIntyre's statement to the ecological model by simply saying that the building, maintaining, and revising of communicative ecosystems is a practice in MacIntyre's sense. Community is not a fixed product serving some external end but a complex of continuing communicative acts between individuals and subgroups. Rhetoric thus serves an ontological function in the practice of creating and destroying communities. Following MacIntyre's definition of virtue in relation to practice, virtues of communication would be acquired human qualities the possession and exercise of which tend to enable communicators to achieve those goods which are internal to the practice of communication and the lack of which effectively prevents them from achieving any such goods.[13] Virtues would then enable communicators to achieve intrinsic goods by encouraging the functioning of the communicative ecosystem.

Furthermore, since the telos of a human life is the quest for the good rather than the production of any specific good, human life is praxis not poiesis.[14] Happiness is not a product but the state that accompanies the active practice of seeking the good. Individual acts of production are subservient to this overarching practice. So, for example, an individual has a job to produce income in order to seek the good. At the same time, the performance of certain income-producing activities that are hybrid production-practices retain the characteristic of offering intrinsic rewards. So the portrait painter may earn an income from painting even while achieving the intrinsic good of excellence in artistry. It is only at the extreme of drudgery that an act of production does not retain any aspects of practice.

Rhetoric is a productive art. It is not exercised for its own sake but for the sake of an external goal. Nevertheless, rhetoric retains the possibility of achieving the intrinsic goods of the general practice of communication on which it is based. A speaker, for example, may be satisfied with a good performance regardless of its actual persuasive effects. The original concept of epideictic rhetoric was the display of rhetoric as an artful form of communication. The audience was called on to judge the excellence of the speaker qua speaker. On the other hand, the extrinsic goods that forensic and deliberative rhetoric serve are often the intrinsic goods of the practice of building and sustaining human communities or ecosystems. In addition, through the processes of identification rhetoric has an intrinsic function of building and/or weakening community. So rhetoric is a productive art that is interconnected with the practices of communication and community building.

Furthermore, communication itself is a hybrid of poiesis and praxis. An episode of communication that contained no elements of rhetorical attempts to influence

would be rare. One might begin a conversation simply for the sake of conversing, but during the course of the conversation opportunities to influence the other are likely to arise, to be perceived, and to be acted upon. In addition, communicative acts have consequences, whether they are consciously intended or not; so communication as praxis may turn out to be rhetorical in effect. For instance, one might unintentionally persuade someone else not to commit suicide by engaging the other in seemingly unrelated conversation that happened to have the effect of confirming the other's personhood. This would be a happy coincidence but not an ethical act at the individual level unless one were aware of the probable effects of confirming and disconfirming communication and so developed a habit of confirming communication. Otherwise, no moral deliberation is involved.

Communication as a practice is a source of goods such as self-expression that contribute to the overall quest for good. In addition, communication is the means of building, maintaining, and transforming the various communicative ecosystems within which communication as both praxis and poiesis take place. A communicative ecosystem in existence includes any given social system or community, for example, Aristotle's polis--a far more extensive concept than our limited notion of state. The polis was the ultimate level of community for Aristotle. From an ecological perspective, the polis would better be seen as one level of communicative system within the larger ecosystem. An ethics of communication must consider effects on the communicative ecosystem and that system's ability to support the virtues of the praxis of communication.

Because individuals must develop their ethics through membership in communities and because the value of a practice can only be assessed by situating it in a larger framework, MacIntyre also anchors his theory of ethics in the requirement for a continuing tradition--a tradition that is, in fact, a continuing argument about what is to be considered good within that tradition.[15] It is on this point that his argument has been challenged as culturally relativistic. For if the nature of the good is dependent upon a particular tradition's definition of the good, and that tradition's definition is not commensurable with another tradition's, how would one choose between them? MacIntyre argues rather weakly that he supposes in most cases commensurable grounds would be found.[16] Condit argues that rhetoric achieves a public consensus between incommensurate private interests.[17] But even if this claim is true, a more difficult problem seems hidden within this question of cultural relativism: How can a continuing tradition or a rhetorical synthesis of differing traditions criticize itself? On what grounds could such criticism take place? A rhetorical consensus that attains hegemony becomes a kind of continuing tradition. No doubt such a tradition will enforce its own definition of the good; but should that definition be accepted?

Both Aristotle and MacIntyre offer a functional view of ethics, but both of their functional definitions of excellence depends upon a particular culture or continuing tradition. These are public traditions, like the consensus that Condit sees as the solution to the problem of cultural relativism. Yet unless a means is found of evaluating the cultural values, all of these theories are culturally relativistic. As Dewey and Tufts point out, morality cannot be confined to group or tribal standards. Group morality is for the most part unconsciously habitual, favoring a fixed order rather than progress. A theory of ethics must address two collisions that take place in the development of society:

(1) The collision between the authority and interests of the group and the independence and private interests of the individual.

(2) The collision between order and progress, between habit and reconstruction or reformation.[18]

The concept of ecosystem is preferable to the concept of continuing tradition and the concept of rhetorical consensus because it does not become tied to any particular historical definition of good. The telos of the ecosystem is the nurturing of all the individuals living within it. Since the telos of a human life is the quest for the good, a communicative ecosystem's virtues are those which enable its constituent members to seek in their own way for the good. A continuing tradition is very likely to constitute a large part of the individual's definition of good, but the tradition itself can be evaluated on the basis of its consequences for the communicative ecosystem. So for example a given oligarchic continuing tradition could possibly be criticized on the basis of its failure to nurture the practice of communication among all its members. Or a benevolent oligarchy may be accepted as a necessary step in a cultural ecosystem's development but also may be criticized as unable to sustain and improve that ecosystem as the constituent members develop. Perhaps this is why children must leave home to continue their development; the oligarchy of parents is unable to adapt to adult patterns of communication with the children. At any rate, the ability to criticize a given cultural pattern on the basis of the telos of the communicative ecosystem takes into account both the collision between group and individual and the collision between order and progress.

Neither MacIntyre's continuing tradition nor Condit's rhetorical consensus escape the problem of cultural relativism. Condit postulates "objective boundary conditions" that eventually "impinge upon human morality"; but she does not show how these conditions lead to a transvaluing of received values. This is a problem that has plagued modern philosophy. For example, the problem of a tradition's inability to critique itself is at the heart of the dispute between Continental schools of hermeneutics, represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and ideological criticism, represented by Jurgen Habermas.[19] Gadamer's position is that the moral agent necessarily operates within a tradition. One must participate in a tradition in order to understand it. All human beings find themselves situated in history and are subject to the authority of the traditions within which they exist. One cannot distance oneself from all traditions and become independent of one's past in order to criticize that tradition. Habermas counters with a theory that is ahistorical in a utopian direction. He argues that the continuing tradition conceals distortions at the level where work, power, and discourse overlap. The mission of the critical social sciences is the unmasking of these distortions under the direction of an emancipatory interest. But these distortions can only be disclosed in comparison to an ahistorical ideal that apparently must be accepted a priori.

Ricoeur considers the debate between Gadamer and Habermas to reflect complementary elements in the practice of valuation. Gadamer emphasizes understanding through the authority of tradition; Habermas emphasizes explanation through ideological criticism. Understanding requires participation; explanation requires distanciation. In fact, both participation and distanciation are required. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" in understanding of a text implies a distance between perspectives. The text can only be understood after its structure has been explained. Habermas's detachment of explanation of ideologies from understanding could only work if there were some ahistorical place "from where we could consider from a distance and from on high the theater of illusions, the battle field of ideologies. Then it would be possible to explain without understanding."[20] Ricoeur contends that our ability to perceive and challenge a given ideology is dependent on our received evaluations. What we can do is "transvaluate" the received values. Transvaluating is done through a constant process of reinterpreting received valuations:

> There are no other paths, in effect, for carrying out our interest in emancipation than by incarnating it within cultural acquisitions. Freedom only posits itself by transvaluating what has already been evaluated. The ethical life is a perpetual transaction between the project of freedom and its ethical situation outlined by the given world of institutions.[21]

I interpret Condit's notion of the rhetorical construction of public morality to agree with Ricoeur's approach. But neither suggests a means of guiding this transaction. Certainly I agree that to seek the point of equilibrium between individual and system in a system operating in history is a "perpetual transaction." The disposition to continue to enter into this transaction is what it means to be ethically motivated. But wisdom requires more than ethical motivation. Practical wisdom must be informed by a hermeneutical understanding of social values and a critical comparison of those values with the ideal telos of the society as communicative ecosystem.

Take, for example, the case of a journalist working within the American tradition of "objectivity" in new reporting. The traditional valuation of "objectivity" gives to government bureaucracies the power to define social problems. Police reports, census studies, findings of government commissions are treated as "hard news." By staying within that tradition, the journalist supports order and stability in the current communicative ecosystem. If the journalist were to allow other elements in society to define the problem and treated their reports as hard news, the result would likely be innovation and change within the system. By staying within the tradition, the journalist would probably be more understandable; the readers are accustomed to interpreting news stories in that tradition. By violating the tradition, the journalist would probably be more interesting; difference is more interesting than sameness. Ethically, the journalist must decide where to strike the balance at this point in time. And the journalist should take into account the functioning of the current communicative ecosystem in supporting all its constituent members in their quest for the good life. In deliberating with practical wisdom, the journalist would transvalue "objectivity" if he or she were to strike a new balance point in order to increase the communicative opportunity for all members of the communicative system.

In order to transvalue the person making an ethical decision must be able to appeal to some concept that transcends the historical situation. Habermas offers an a priori ideal that is dogmatic rather than empirical. The concept offered here is the telos of the communicative ecosystem to nurture each person in the achievement of the individual telos, which is the quest for the good. This concept is not an a priori ideal but an empirical examination of what Condit called objective boundary conditions. We are systems that are embedded in and dependent upon other systems. The ecological principle is simply that in the process of seeking the good, all of the individual systems should support the ecosystem that supports them. However, support of the ecosystem includes attempts to change the ecosystem in order to make it more sustainable over the long term. The most sustainable ecosystem appears to be one in which all of the individual members have equal access to the channels of communication. Such a system would be able to stay informed of changing conditions and adapt to them. Because the system was supporting each of its members, the members would have reason to be loyal to the system. Since an ecological model accepts no a priori assumption of privilege, by default we must assume that each member has equal worth to the system. On the basis of empirical, historical circumstance, one might argue that certain members deserve to play a leading role--warriors, for example, in a system that is under attack. One cannot assume, however, that a given class has a universal claim to greater worth. Universal equality is a desirable objective because it fulfills the telos of the system.

A communicative ecosystem has a telos because it is a human institution. The universe may be as absurd and without purpose as Nietzsche and some existentialists have argued. Still, I would counter that humans may impose their own order and purpose upon it. Social systems have the telos of nurturing the individuals within them because that is the purpose for which we have instituted them. All individuals have an equal claim to systemic support because no individual can justify a a priori claim to greater or lesser support. The ideal communicative system supports all of its parts equally, and the parts in turn support the communicative system. The practice of supporting the system is a source of goods for the individual and thus complements the individual telos considered as a quest for the good.

This ideal communicative ecosystem serves as an ahistorical model by which historical ecosystems may be assessed. Because no historical system will meet the ideal, the search for the golden mean will also involve transformation of the existing system. Knee-jerk support for the existing system is not inherently virtuous. The telos of the individual and the telos of the larger system are interrelated and both must be taken into account in the making of ethical decisions. Virtue is the habitual disposition to take both into account. The practice of living ethically will include the practice of system building and system transforming. These practices involve the special ontological consequences of rhetoric acting upon the communicative ecosystem. In any particular case, the ethical question becomes how to help the present system

become more like the ideal without making the given system less viable. A communicative ecosystem cannot be created ex nihilo based on a utopian model; it must grow out of an existing system. The model simply provides the sense of direction that is lacking in Condit's rhetorical process.

Any given ecosystem maintains a state of balance between the whole and the parts. Using a physical analogy, that state of balance could be described as an equilibrium between centripetal force and centrifugal force. Centripetal force entices the system to collapse upon its center; centrifugal force entices the parts to scatter away from the center. Furthermore, because an ecosystem exists through space-time, an ecosystem cannot be tied to a static notion of balance such as that contained in the term homeostasis, which is a uniformity of position as though the system could remain in the same state. Balance in an ecosystem is not a point but a line through time--a "perpetual transaction." This conceptualization of equilibrium is captured in the term homeorhesis, which is uniformity of movement through time.[22] Homeorhesis is an equilibrium between the centrifugal force of the group and the centripetal force of the individual, but in addition it is an equilibrium that is sustained by means of systemic adaptation through time. Thus homeorhesis accounts for both collisions listed by Dewey and Tufts: the individual versus the group, and progress versus order.

A legalistic ethical code assumes homeostasis rather than homeorhesis. The code presumes that the system will remain the same so that a stipulated action today will continue to be appropriate into the indefinite future. But virtue in the Aristotelian sense is the disposition to find the changing point of equilibrium--the mean (meson)--in a complex relationship.[23] For example, Aristotle points out that the desired amount of food for Milo the wrestler to eat would constitute gluttony for the average person. One might develop rules of thumb based on past experiences, but the actual application in a given case requires the exercise of practical wisdom (phronesis).[24] Aristotle's basing of virtue in a flexible mean is correct in principle because it recognizes the complexity of the calculus involved. Aristotle's view is not wrong but simply too limited in scope because it is directed at a specific subculture.

From an ecological perspective, the mean cannot be predetermined because it is a point of equilibrium between many different systems, all of which are in process. Even Milo's food requirements must vary with changes in his own physical system and changes in his environment. Virtue disposes a person to seek the mean, and practical wisdom consists of the ability to find it, at least roughly. Whereas a system of laws is unable to critique itself, an ethic based on virtue and practical wisdom requires a regular reappraisal of the adequacy of the existing state of affairs. However, when the definition of virtue is limited to a continuing tradition or culture it suffers to a degree from the same liability as a codified ethic. No standard external to the tradition would be available with which to critique the tradition itself. Thus such a system favors order over progress and so cannot remain viable over changing conditions. Individual virtues are defined within the constraints of the system without considering what the virtues of the system should be. The same problem arises from Condit's view of rhetorical consensus creating morality. It does not show how we as humans can deliberate about that consensus. I believe that an inquiry into the "objective boundary conditions" of human existence will provide the model for assessing public morality. The ecological model offers the possibility of accounting for individual and systemic needs in determining what the golden mean and hence virtue in these historical circumstance should be. This model allows us to conduct public moral argument about public morality on a commensurate ground.

Having pointed out my differences with Condit's approach to public morality and my own alternative to it, I now, in closing, would like to emphasize my agreement with her. Morality is a public problem because it is a matter of systemic relationships. Her metaphor that morality is a public craft is quite apt. I support her claims that morality is humanly generated, that it is both situational and objective, and that the pessimists are wrong--humanity is capable of moral improvement.[25] In short, my argument supports her major claims. What I have added is a more detailed explication of objective boundary conditions that can provide us a model with which to assess our public moral argument. In the process, I have found that Aristotle and MacIntyre are not as incompatible with the notion of public morality as she suggests. Combining the notion of public and private into a systems relationship should offer a richer understanding of the problem of morality.

This richer understanding brings with it a whole new set of problems for inquiry. I believe that systems theory may offer us some valuable insights into ethical theory. I also believe that the ethical concepts of equality, tolerance, and honesty can be justified on ecological grounds. This is an important area for research. I find it an urgent problem for rhetoricians because I agree with Condit that rhetoric constructs our public morality. It is vitally important, then, that we develop some type of guidelines for evaluating the ethical dimensions of rhetoric. The ecological model is intended as a step in that direction.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Ronald Arnett, "The Status of Communication Ethics Scholarship in Speech Communication Journals from 1915 to 1985," Central States Speech Journal 38 (1987): 44-61; and Richard L. Johannesen, Ethics in Human Communication, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1983).

2. Celeste Michelle Condit, "Crafting Virtue: The Rhetorical Construction of Public Morality," Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987): 79-97.

3. In treating MacIntyre's system as essentially a "privatized" system, Condit fails to account for the importance of community in MacIntyre's thought. The problem is not a "privatized" morality but a too narrow sense of community. Perhaps this is what Condit means by "privatized." See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1984).

4. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics 1098a.

5. MacIntyre 205.

6. MacIntyre 211.

7. MacIntyre 213-14.

8. MacIntyre 219.

9. MacIntyre 219.

10. MacIntyre 187.

11. See, for example, Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics 1094a.

12. MacIntyre 187-88.

13. MacIntyre's own version can be found in After Virtue 191.

14. In some theologies, of course, life on earth is poiesis not praxis because its purpose is to earn eternal reward. In this case, life on earth is not the completed narrative but merely an episode, comparable to a career; eternal life is the praxis.

15. MacIntyre 222.

16. MacIntyre, "Postscript to the Second Edition," After Virtue 276-77.

17. Condit 86-87.

18. John Dewey and James H. Tufts, Ethics, rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1932) 66-67.

19. The ethical debate is summarized in Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue," Philosophy Today 17 (1973): 153-65.

20. Ricoeur 163.

21. Ricoeur 165.

22. The difference is the difference between stasis, standing or position, and rhesis, flow or movement through time. Homeostasis is a term of cybernetic regulation, for which homeorhesis is the ecological correlate. See David Conrad Steffenson, "A Foundational Model for an 'Ecological Social Ethic,'" diss., Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities, 238-42.

23. Aristotle, EN 1106b and 1109b.

24. Aristotle, EN 1144b.

25. Condit 81.